

30

WASHINGTON TIMES
8 November 1985

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CIA winds up with egg all over its face

Whose heads should roll?

A mustachioed KGB spy master has emerged as the central character of a real-life drama that could have come straight from the pages of a John Le Carre novel.

Americans may never know the entire truth about Vitaly Yurchenko, whose surprise press conference at the Soviet Embassy has left the CIA with egg on its face.

Whether he began his association with the CIA as a genuine defector who subsequently changed his mind or whether he pretended to defect as part of an ingenious KGB disinformation scheme may forever remain a mystery on this side of the Iron Curtain.

But one aspect of the bizarre affair already is clear: The emerging details indict the CIA. At best, the agency is guilty of some highly embarrassing bungling.

Mr. Yurchenko's claim that he was forcibly abducted in Italy and drugged is dubious and rejected by virtually all experts.

Yet, that doesn't excuse the CIA's dismal failure to recognize the trouble it had on its hands in the person of Vitaly Yurchenko.

The agency obviously would prefer to have the public believe that Mr. Yurchenko simply changed his mind about defecting and, for one reason or another, wanted to return home.

A simple case of homesickness — said to be common among defectors — is easier to explain away than faulty counterintelligence procedures.

But, regardless of what the CIA claims, there is reason to believe the agency was afflicted with a classic case of hubris. Its pride in netting a high-ranking KGB official may have been its undoing.

It now turns out that not everyone familiar with the "defection" was convinced Mr. Yurchenko was telling all.

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Sen. William S. Cohen, Republican of Maine, has revealed that he and two other members of the Senate Intelligence Committee had expressed serious reservations to top CIA officials about Mr. Yurchenko's motives.

But the CIA was in no mood to heed any doubting Thomas. The agency seemed convinced Mr. Yurchenko would provide information that would lead to major setbacks for Soviet intelligence.

So confident was the agency, it barely had started debriefing Mr. Yurchenko when word of the "defection" first appeared in the international press.

Mr. Yurchenko reportedly had sought a blackout on publicity as a condition for defecting. Yet, the first stories about him were published in Italy shortly after he signed a statement at the American Embassy in Rome requesting asylum.

By all accounts, the CIA has been able to verify most of what Mr. Yurchenko told his debriefers.

From what is known, however, the information he provided has failed to unmask any ongoing Soviet spy operation in the United States.

He did implicate a former CIA employee, Edward L. Howard, in previously passing American secrets to the Soviets.

When fingered, Howard somehow managed to flee the country. Talk about your Keystone Cops!

Former CIA Director Bobby Inman says Mr. Yurchenko became upset when a former girlfriend who now lives in Canada refused to renew their affair.

Passion, indeed, is a strong motivator. But it is difficult to credit romantic rejection as a reason for Mr. Yurchenko's desiring a homecoming. Surely, a genuine defector from the KGB would be sufficiently sophisticated to fear the jeopardy involved in a return.

Regardless, it simply is astounding that a defector, who had not completed debriefing, was able to slip away from his handlers so easily — and in Georgetown, of all places.

While not a prisoner, Mr. Yurchenko, as a "valuable property," ought to have been under surveillance.

Even before the current fiasco, many here expressed skepticism about the capabilities of CIA Director William Casey, who until now has led a charmed political life.

Mr. Casey has fended off conflict-of-interest questions about his investments and has survived the severe criticism directed at some aspects of CIA operations in Nicaragua.

But the Yurchenko affair brings far more humiliation to the administration than revelations of mines placed in Nicaraguan harbors or disclosures about CIA pamphlets on political murders.

Yes, heads may finally roll at Langley. And, hopefully, any firings or demotions will be accompanied by some sorely needed counterintelligence reforms.